



A New Approach to

Piano Technique

by Ruth A. Dickerson



A NEW APPROACH TO PIANO TECHNIQUE presents with inter clarity a unique principle of piano playing which, applicable to each of the technical problems involved in the piano repetoire, is the simplest and most assured key to technical mastery, and an invaluable aid to the development of authoritative musical interpretation.

This principle, essential to the integrity and fluency of all art forms, is freedom, Carefully analyzing the musculature involved in piano techniques, Miss Dickerson describes, in seventeen

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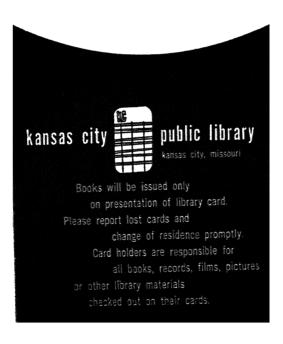
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by RUTH A. DICKERSON

NEW YORK

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Published by Pageant Press, Inc. 101 Fifth Avenue, New York 3, N. Y.

FIRST EDITION

Manufactured in the United States of America

FOREWORD

As long as I can remember I loved the piano and wanted to play it. My earliest musical recollection is of listening entranced to my mother and aunt playing a four hand arrangement of the Beethoven symphonies, and begging them to go on long after they had had enough.

When, as a small child, I had my first piano lessons, I was very lucky in my teacher, even though the method was not inspiring. Still, I had no problems, it all seemed natural and easy. In fact, I can well remember winning a prize of a baby rabbit in a pupil's recital. The fact that my teacher thought of such a prize shows that she had a rare understanding of children. Unfortunately, this unusual person soon went abroad to study and my musical education became haphazard, most of it unbelievably bad and all of it contrary to any logical use of the hand and keyboard.

By the time I was old enough to realize what the piano meant to me, I had reached the conclusion that

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pianists were born with a fluent technique. In those days of musical giants there was an aura of mystery about famous artists, no doubt a deliberate build up, which separated them from the rest of humanity. That nine tenths of this glamour was the result of hard work and good luck with an early environment, hardly seems to have occurred to anybody. The only person to see this fallacy seems to have been Paderewski's famous colored chef who said, so the story goes, "Mr. Paderewski had to learn to play the piano but Ah was borned a cook."

When I could take a hand in my own education I went to some good teachers, and though I could play, I always felt constrained, and that the work involved came between me and the music. However, I love to teach and I hoped to give others the sensible and logical training that I had missed. When I began to have older pupils who took their work seriously, I was disturbed to find that the best I could do was to say, "This is the way it is generally taught." But all the time I felt that it was a wrong way.

It is a long and tiresome story of a little light and a lot of discouragement. Finally I saw that the trouble was I didn't have the courage of my convictions, and that if I hoped to get anywhere I would have to abandon what I had been taught and follow my instinct. At once I began to make progress, but it was slow and I often found myself in a blind alley. When I discovered the springing finger I thought nothing more was needed. The speed it gave me was thrilling, but I soon realized that a free technique depends upon

other things: a loose wrist, weight control, etc., as I have tried to explain in this book, co-ordinated by a strong supple rhythm and led by the music itself. The first time I experienced in my own playing the glorious freedom that all this gives, it was a distinct shock to realize how different my life would have been if I could have understood these simple principles in my youth. I knew then that, no matter what the difficulties, I would have to make my notes into a book, so that anyone who wanted to might profit by my experience.

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A NEW APPROACH TO PIANO TECHNIQUE

I

INTRODUCTION

THE NECESSITY FOR A NEW METHOD IN TEACHING THE PIANO

The question that comes to mind when discussing a new method of piano playing is: why should such a thing be necessary? One might suppose that by now everything ought to be known about teaching the instrument, but if this were true, why isn't piano playing, both amateur and professional, much better than it is? One has only to go to concerts or read the reviews to see that every pianist has his limitationsunnecessary limitations. Some have brilliance and lack a good lyric tone, or perhaps fascinate the ear with scintillating runs and leave it disappointed when it comes to heavy tones. And where is the pianist with a really singing fortissimo? -something that is actually very easy to produce when the principles involved are understood. These technical limitations naturally carry over into the interpretive field. A pianist who may be eminently satisfactory in eighteenth century music may be disappointing in Chopin, or dazzle the audience with the fireworks of Liszt and leave it baffled and weary when it comes to a Brahms concerto, not from any want of musical understanding, but from a simple lack of equipment and ease of presentation.

And what about the pianist who can bring out the resources of the instrument only when he is in the right mood? The artist cannot always be equally inspired, but he can at least have a command of tone for the requirements of the music. If he lacks it, there is obviously something wrong with his technical education. This he acquired unquestioningly as a child and if, in his maturity, he has any doubts about its worth, he has never had the time to do the necessary research to find out where his early training has let him down. This is where the trouble lies. Young pianists are not taught how to produce an adequate variety of tone together with ease in producing it. Few people realize what a waste of time nine-tenths of the average student's practice is. His progress depends upon sheer repetition with an enormous amount of trial and error, and then at best he ends up with a onesided equipment. This is a poor return for all the work involved.

That an ideal command of tone and use of the hand is possible is proved by the effortless playing of Josef Hofmann. His ringing fortissimos, ravishing melodies and exquisitely delicate runs were all tossed off with the greatest ease. True, this may have been instinctive and perhaps he could not have explained

how he had so perfectly adapted his hand to the keys. Nevertheless, he accomplished it somehow, and if one pianist can develop that kind of technique, others can too, if not by instinct, then by analytical study, whether or not they have Hofmann's musical genius in using their technique after they get it. What is being considered here is not so much musicianship as the equipment which will allow the pianist to give free expression to such musical gifts as he may possess.

Many people argue that a method is unnecessary, or too mechanical an approach to playing, but the same people would never advise an athlete to neglect form. A method of tone production and the use of the hand is as necessary in learning to play the piano as form is in athletic skill. Some people may play tennis well without instruction, but no one is likely to develop into a champion without working hard at form and analyzing strokes carefully. So, too, a musically sensitive child with a strong and flexible hand may produce a good tone and an easy technique naturally, but the chances of his developing his full potential are very poor unless he knows what he is doing.

Then there is the common tragedy that older pianists often begin to lose their technique when they are still at the height of their interpretive powers. Some stiffness, lack of flexibility, or even insecurity may have crept into their playing from the strain of continual concertizing. But this could easily be corrected if the pianist understood the principles underlying tone and technique.

Obviously, it is wiser to have no method at all than to have a wrong one. It is far better to let the pupil flounder around with only his ear for a guide than to teach him a way of working that may injure his hand and ruin his tone, for if a method does not produce a wide variety of tone and an easy technique, there is always a chance that a gifted student may play in spite of his method, really working against himself. This is bound to lay up trouble for the future, as his ear makes demands that his training may not be able to fulfill, and consequently a mental friction develops which is likely to have serious consequences. But it takes only a little careful study to show that the proper use of hand and key can be taught with great advantage.

Practice makes perfect only if it is correct practice. Also, a method that is good for anything should be good for everything. That is, chords, runs, trills, octaves, etc., should all be produced with the same fundamental finger action. At the same time, it can be shown that the tone quality can be varied at will to the full resources of the instrument.

If the artist needs a method, the amateur needs it ten times more, for he rarely has much time for practice and must make every minute count. While a student may be satisfied to play poorly, with stiff arms and a bad tone, or perhaps in a relaxed but insecure manner, he will be able to play more interesting pieces much sooner if he will devote a little time to the study of technical form; that is, how to work directly for the best results, both from a tonal and a

muscular standpoint. The difference between the amateur and the professional should be of quantity rather than quality, a difference of degree only.

Often an amateur, within the limits of his artistic progress, could be heard with as much pleasure as a professional if he had the means to give expression to his talents. While he cannot be expected to have the repertoire for concert hall performance, he should have, given a reasonable amount of practice, a command of tone and ease of technique that will make his playing a delight to hear.

Analyzing hand position and finger motion will never make for mechanical playing if the musical aim is kept in view. However, that the musical aim must always be kept in view cannot be overemphasized. The whole point of finger training is to have the technique so easy that it is second nature to produce the dictates of the ear without conscious thought. In fact, it is the great demands of the music that finally develop a comprehensive technique, and one that becomes subconscious. But there must be a well-prepared foundation before this much-desired end can be reached.

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THEORY OF TONE PRODUCTION

The first thing to be considered is the piano action itself. When this is understood, the player will find it easier to adapt his touch to the key. Even someone who has never played the piano can easily see that the key is the lever by which the finger makes the hammer hit the strings. If one experiments a little, one can see that it is also a sort of springboard, the key springing up after it is played with an almost lifelike buoyancy.

The second consideration is the hand and how it ought to work with the key and not against it, using finger, hand and arm so that no stiffness develops.

The student is usually taught to raise his fingers and hit the keys. But one has only to look at the raised fingers to see that this is strained and unnatural. Also, it makes a hard tone, as it will compress the felts and give a tone similar to that made by a hammer that is worn and hard. After all, when using any lever, its power is increased by adding weight and not by

hitting it. And if the key is hit, it will destroy the help that the finger ought to have from the rebound of the key itself, as the player will realize when he begins to experiment.

One of the worst results of raised fingers is that they will be controlled in the forearm instead of in the hand. This means that the wrist is not free and thoroughly relaxed. If the arm tires, it shows that arm and finger muscles are not completely separated.

Of course, many artists have been taught as children to raise their fingers and have finally adapted their touch more or less to the key, but while high striking fingers will no doubt develop muscle, they may easily produce muscular and mental tension. Some students will never have technical freedom with that method, and at best it is tedious and unlikely to produce a good tone.

There are other methods which teach the student not to raise his fingers, but they provide nothing to give a good articulation and weight control. Unless the student has natural facility, the playing is certain to be flabby or muddy, or both. There is little variety of tone and almost no brilliance. The whole problem, then, is to discover how to use the hand and key so that they work together to secure the finest articulation with ease and the greatest variety of tone.

III

POSITION AT THE PIANO

Before analyzing finger action, the student should make sure that he is sitting correctly at the piano. He should sit high enough so that when the hand is on the keys and the shoulders relaxed, the elbow is slightly higher than the finger tips. This helps the circulation, and also allows the use of upper arm weight in heavy chords and octaves. A low elbow retards the circulation of the blood to the hands and will interfere with the free use of arm weight.

It goes without saying that the player should sit straight, with his head up, and never get into the habit of slumping over the keyboard. It is most important to avoid any tightness of neck, shoulders or wrist. The hand should be well-arched and the wrist low and so relaxed that it feels limp.

If the position at the piano is correct, and the arms relaxed, the wrist will hang lower than the fingers except when following the hand as in thumb crossing,

the end of runs, etc. This allows the *hand* to carry the weight and gives the greatest leverage to the key. In this connection, it will help the student if he can arrange a mirror where he can watch and criticize his own motions.

IV

HOW THE HAND SHOULD BE USED

The most casual study of the piano action makes it apparent that raising the fingers and hitting the keys is the wrong approach to playing if one wants a beautiful tone and an easy technique. Nor will vague ideas of relaxation without a definite method of using the fingers be much use. But the keys have to be set in motion somehow, and this cannot be left to chance if something more than a haphazard kind of technique is desired. Since the key is both a lever and a kind of springboard, there is only one logical way for the fingers to work, and that is as if they themselves were springs, much as a diver uses a springboard.

If the student will place his hand lightly on the keyboard in five finger position with the fingers curved, and then straighten each finger in turn, he will feel that this spring is easy and natural. He must make sure that the spring is into the arch of the hand and that the wrist is perfectly limp. The finger does a sort of "push up" from the bottom of the key, upward

and slightly outward, then immediately returns to the curved position, never losing contact with the key and moving exactly with it both down and up. In fact, if the finger is to work on the key (and there is not time for anything else in fast playing), all it can do is to straighten, or spring against the key.

The hand should be well arched, the wrist hanging low and free, with the arm carried so lightly that it has no influence at all on the fingers. Each finger should be worked in turn until it can spring easily and smoothly, and has acquired a feeling for the action of the kev. The aim of this practice is to develop a command of a pure and independent finger action, entirely divorced from wrist and arm. In order to achieve this freedom, there must be a definite give of the wrist with each finger spring. Later this can be reduced to a minimum or increased if the passage demands emphasis, but without a motion of the wrist with every finger motion, one cannot be sure that the wrist is relaxed and perfectly free. The player ought to experiment for himself with key and finger action, aiming to satisfy his desire for technical control and musical feeling.

In fast passages, it is important that the fingers have the benefit of the rebound (repetition action) of the keys to bring them up, which is not possible if the keys are hit. Since the keys move only one to three-eighths of an inch, this requires very fine timing, which will come only with practice, for the fingers must relax quickly after playing if they are to come up with the keys.

The question of relaxation is of the utmost importance, but one must know what muscles to relax. Naturally, the hand cannot relax when it is playing, but the shoulders, arm and wrist should hang loose and light in soft playing, and loose and heavy in loud plaving. The wrist must be perfectly free in both cases, any weight used being carried by the arch (metacarpal joints). It is surprising how often one may think that his arm and wrist are perfectly relaxed, when actually he is using the forearm muscles to do what ought to be done by the hand alone. This has the effect of a brake on the fingers as one muscle works against another, and is the reason so many students go to pieces in fast passages. The more effort made, the worse the playing becomes, because the arm muscles are interfering with the finger action. This is easy to understand if one intentionally tenses the arm muscles while moving the arm. Anyone who plays the piano or a game of golf stiffly is simply using one muscle against another, instead of leaving the muscles which should be doing the work absolutely free.

Although the whole idea of finger spring may seem revolutionary, it will soon become second nature for it is easy and comfortable, involves no tension, and gives a wonderful feeling of mastery.

The following exercise is a test of a correctly relaxed arm and wrist. It may be done with profit even after the player has acquired a good technique. A few minutes spent on this exercise at the beginning of each practice period will save hours of work.

\mathbf{v}

EXERCISE TO FREE THE WRIST

In a good five finger position, with the hand well arched, hold down the five keys lightly, barely keeping them depressed. Like the previous exercise, the wrist should be hanging free and low. Now, very slowly, raise the wrist (not the arm) from low to high and back again in one *continuous* slow motion, the arm passive and light.

Even if the student has used this exercise before, since its present application is new, he should work at it again, keeping in mind the idea of the free finger spring, a continuous motion, and no weight. Later weight should be used, but not until the arch is strong enough to carry it without any tension in arm or wrist. If the fingers tremble when the hand is lightly holding the keys, or as the weight is being added, it is because the student has been playing with a stiff wrist or arm, and he will have to proceed very slowly and patiently. When a pure finger stroke is acquired, the fingers will become steady and then the weight

may be gradually increased as the fingers and hand grow strong.

After this exercise has been done with all five fingers holding the keys down, each finger should be worked separately in the same way; that is, holding one key down with one finger at a time and moving the wrist up and down in the same slow way. The finger does its "push up" as the wrist moves upward.

VI

APPLYING THE THEORY

As soon as the student feels that he has command of the finger spring and wrist motion, he should begin work on five finger exercises, scales, arpeggios, and trills. Chords and octaves should not be attempted until the finger spring is second nature. In the beginning, everything should be worked slowly, keeping these ideas in mind:

- 1) The finger springs upward, slightly outward and toward the next note.
- 2) The player should feel every note under his hand before he plays it. If this is done consciously in slow work, it will become automatic in speed and give great accuracy and assurance.
- 3) The wrist gives with every note.

4) All practice must be pianissimo until the hand is strong, and the playing comfortable, secure and very fast without effort.

If the finger springs from the bottom of the key the playing is bound to be secure and firm. If the wrist gives with every finger motion, the arm and wrist are bound to be relaxed, and can be a help, not a hindrance, to the fingers. If every note is felt before it is played, accuracy is certain. With this preparation, clearness and speed are inevitable.

Forte playing will be considered later.

VII

SLOW MOTION

There is no better way to gain complete mastery of any kind of technique than to work in slow motion; that is, one continuous slow motion like a slow movie of fast work, not just a slow tempo. This will help to develop an absolutely relaxed wrist with an agile finger action. Any jerkiness or tension is bound to show up if the motion is one *continuous* slow movement.

Let the shoulders and arm hang *lightly* on the arch of the hand, and move the wrist gently as each finger plays in order to be sure that the finger is detached and independent, and the wrist completely loose and free.

This practice should be done pianissimo, because that is the only way in which the player can be sure that he is not controlling the fingers from the forearm. Forte playing should be done with weight, which makes for ease and a beautiful tone, but until the arch is strong, it cannot carry the weight, which will be transferred to the forearm and cause stiffness, and is certain to interfere with freely moving fingers and wrist. Also, the ear is keener and will not tire as easily if the practice is pianissimo. No forte plaving should be attempted until the student can play very fast with a firm pianissimo.

This slow motion work should be used in learning new pieces and in relearning old ones. Nothing does so much to keep the repertoire in mind and the muscles relaxed. It also gives the inner ear a chance

to function creatively.

It is most important to practise a great deal without looking at the hands. A little experimenting will show that this makes for relaxation and is the surest foundation for speed. Incidentally, it is the quickest way to improve sight reading.

A mirror will be a great help in all this work, as it will allow the player to watch his hands and position at the keyboard. If his motions do not look easy and graceful, with the wrist following the movements of the hand, he is not working correctly. This, of course, is quite different from looking directly at the hands, and gives an objective feeling difficult to describe.

The most helpful thing in a foundation for speed or any kind of technique is a strong rhythm, and it should be developed in the earliest slow work and

even in the simplest exercises.

VIII

KEY RELEASE

Although in every kind of technique the finger always springs from the bottom of the key, upward and slightly outward, the force is released before the key reaches its bed. The finger "follows through," and actually springs after the tone is made. The exact point at which the force should be released as the key moves downward is something that the player will have to discover for himself, as it depends upon the desired tone quality. The student with a well trained ear will feel this instinctively, but in the beginning it will be necessary to work it out with careful and critical experimentation.

In forte playing, heavy chords, etc., it is especially important not to drive the hammer, but to release the force quickly; otherwise the tone will be hard.

IX

TONE AND TOUCH

If the player thinks of the piano as a series of bells, and of swinging the hammer at the strings as he would at a bell, he will instinctively time his motions to produce the tone he desires. But he should understand the mechanics of tone variety.

Tone may be varied in three ways, not considering the use of the pedal:

- 1) By the amount of weight used.
- 2) By the speed of the key.
- 3) By the depth at which the force is released on the kev.
- 4) And by a combination of these elements.

Weight used slowly to the key bed will give a heavy, dull tone.

Weight with speed (of key, not tempo) to the bottom of the key will give a harsh tone.

Weight with speed of key and force released before reaching the key bed will give clear, loud, ringing tone.

Speed of key without weight will give brilliance.

If the student works at these ideas, keeping in mind the lever-springboard action of the key, he will soon have a fine command of tone variety. Of course one cannot think of such detail when playing, but it is necessary to know the principles involved. A good tone is not as difficult to produce as it may seem, for any habit that is comfortable and pleasing is easy to acquire. The proper use of the key is comfortable, and the variety of tone which it can produce is fascinating and soon becomes part of the player's equipment with very little effort.

As soon as the ear is trained for tone quality, and the hand trained to produce it, the desired tone should be produced automatically without conscious thought of method.

X

WEIGHT FOR FORTE PLAYING

When the student feels that his wrist is perfectly loose and that he has considerable facility in soft playing, he should begin to experiment with forte playing. To learn control of weight, he should return to the exercise on P. 13, and gradually add arm weight, making sure that the arch supports it and not the wrist or forearm. As in the former exercise, the wrist begins in a low hanging position and moves slowly up and down. Weight is added gradually, but never more than the finger can carry easily without stiffening the wrist, or causing the fingers to tremble.

Next, scales and arpeggios may be worked with crescendos and diminuendos to establish control of dynamics. The "give" of the wrist should increase with the amount of weight used. Naturally, true fortissimo playing is used with chords and octaves, which will be considered later. Lastly, in forte playing always release the weight on the key *before* it touches the key bed.

XI

SPEED

Speed is not really a separate problem. The tempo of a fast passage should be increased gradually and never beyond the point of great ease, except for an occasional very rapid playing with plenty of dash and bravura without strain or effort and with a total disregard of wrong notes. This will show up the weak spots and give the student a good idea of what he needs. With this exception, playing should never be faster than the keys can be felt under the fingers, rather than seen.

The most important thing in preparation for speed, after a smooth slow motion technique has been secured, is a rapid and free individual finger spring, together with a slight motion, or give, of the wrist to make sure that it is perfectly relaxed. It is especially important to be certain that the arms and shoulders are absolutely loose. The slightest tightening of these muscles acts as a brake on the fingers.

Theoretically, after the slow motion practice, a gradually increased speed and whatever weight is needed for variety in dynamics are all that are necessary for a good technique. However, some people may find that this is not enough for fast playing, because the tiny motion of the fingers is not quick enough for the requirements of an increased tempo. In that case, the individual finger action may be speeded up in two ways:

- 1) The down stroke: Let the finger spring prestissimo to the bottom of one key while touching the next. Pause and relax. Then play each note as fast as possible with a pause before the next, until the run is complete, always touching one key in advance. For example, if one is working the scale of C, play C as fast as possible and hold it down while touching D. Relax. Then play D while touching E, etc., until the scale is complete, relaxing between notes.
- 2) The down-up stroke: The finger moves quickly down and up with each key, never losing contact with the key played while touching the next key, so that each note is prepared well in advance. When the individual finger stroke is rapid and easy with a loose wrist, the whole passage should be practised with a gradually increasing

tempo, while keeping the same feeling of arm and wrist relaxation as in the slow motion practice, until the desired speed is attained. It is wise to be able to play comfortably faster than necessary, so that the correct tempo will never sound like the absolute limit.

If the slightest stiffness or arm fatigue develops, return to a slower tempo. But even in the slowest (or fastest) tempo there should be a feeling of never stopping, of a *continuous* motion. Add weight for dynamics only when the fingers are strong enough to carry it, and not transfer it to the arm or wrist.

In extended positions do not try to cover more than one note at a time. The less the hand is stretched, the more flexibility it will have and the more endurance. Also, the tone quality will be better. In fact, the hand should always be held in as much of a "fist" as possible. Even a small hand will be secure in wide reaches and jumps, and the playing smooth, if the habit has been formed of always touching a note before playing it. The thumb, of course, should be flexible and the wrist motion should help it when it crosses under the hand.

Since virtuosity requires the fingers to move as if with an independent life of their own, that is, without conscious control, the player would do well to exercise his imagination in the first fast practice and let his hands "go"; in other words, let him play as if he had already conquered the difficulty and make no effort regardless of mistakes. This will show him where his weak spots are and he will learn how a good technique should feel.

The chief point is to increase ease rather than speed. If the student will find the tempo at which he can play a given passage without any effort whatsoever, and aim for even greater ease in that tempo, until he can look around the room and still keep going without tension, speed will increase naturally. But at every increase in speed he should work for this extreme facility before attempting a still faster tempo. To put it another way, the student who can play with ease at a moderate speed is much further advanced than one who can play faster but with tension or stiffness of some kind. With this approach, nothing will sound forced or like hard work, and the playing will be much more pleasant to listen to.

However, a word of caution is necessary. When the student has mastered the preliminary exercises and begins to play, he will find that the method of using a springing finger makes for great speed, and it will be a temptation to use it before he has full muscular control. It is very unlikely that in his old way of playing his hand will be sufficiently strong to take care of speed even without weight, which would make for a tight wrist. The danger is that the player will find such improvement in his facility after working with a springing finger for a short time that he will be tempted to rush ahead before acquiring com-

plete ease and command of tone variety. The only safe procedure is to go back again and again to the first exercises and a careful analysis of motions. It is all too easy to be carried away by the demands of the music and allow some little tension to go uncorrected.

XII

CHORDS

Chords should be practised before octaves because, if properly studied, they will develop a strong arch together with a good hand position and loose wrist. Fundamentally, tone is produced as in finger work, the fingers springing upward and outward from the keys as the wrist gives. The instructor who teaches one touch for runs, another for chords, and yet another for octaves, has misunderstood the mechanism of the instrument and use of the hand. In what might be called pure finger work, there is a give of the wrist but it is hardly noticeable.

Begin practice with a full chord position:

Right hand plays the notes G-C-E-G with the fingers 1-2-4-5.

Left hand plays the notes C-E-G-C with the fingers 5-4-2-1.

- Hold the notes easily with the fingers and shake the wrist up and down as rapidly as possible.
- 2) Repeat the chord rapidly and lightly twice with a pause, then twice again with a pause, etc., for several times; then in groups of three, four, five and six, resting between each group of repetitions.

As soon as light chords are easy, arm weight may be added for forte playing, but the fundamental finger and wrist action is the same as in soft chords. Chords require as much variety of tone as single notes. Cf. P. 20, "Tone and Touch."

Any suitable studies may be used in working up a good chord technique, and exercises in wide skips should be included. The hand takes its position from the "shape" of the chord. The practice of preparing the chord in the air when making wide skips is a waste of time and likely to stiffen the forearm. If the fingers have to grope for the keys at first it will do no harm, provided that the chord is felt under the hand before it is played. In this way (touching notes in slow practice before playing them), the fingers will learn the "feel" of any chord without effort, and the thrust into the arch of the hand as the chord is played should give a clear impression for the memory.

XIII

OCTAVES

There is no real difference between octave and finger technique. This statement may be startling to anyone trained in the old rigid methods of playing octaves, but all one needs to do is to try it to see how easy it is. For the student who has developed a good finger spring and a very loose wrist, octaves offer no difficulty. It is simply a matter of working two fingers (the thumb and fourth or fifth fingers) at the same time with a more pronounced give of the wrist. But before taking up ways of practising octaves, it is well to understand the disadvantages of the old methods.

The student is usually taught to play light octaves with the octave position held tightly, the hand raised and the keys hit in a kind of slapping motion. There is the same objection to this as there is to raising the fingers and hitting the keys in finger technique. Too much time is wasted above the keys, the motion is not free and easy, which may stiffen the forearm, and it is working against the lever action of the key.

The conventional way of playing big octave passages from the elbow, with the hand, wrist and forearm locked as if in one piece, can produce brilliance and does well enough if one is not critical of the tone and if the player does not develop a cramped wrist or arm. Another objection, perhaps a minor one, to having a different octave technique from that of finger work, is that if a run follows an octave passage, it is hard to make the change smoothly.

But octaves can be played with great ease if one uses the same method as that in finger technique, that is, the springing finger with a loose wrist motion.

The student should begin by holding the octave down and shaking the wrist rapidly down and up. When this can be done very fast and easily, the player may practise octave passages, scales in octaves, or any good etudes. They may be worked like any other technique.

- 1) Slow motion, very smoothly and easily.
- 2) One quick stroke from the bottom of one octave to the bottom of the next.
- 3) One quick stroke from the top of one octave to the top of the next, that is, down and up and ready to play the next octave. This is, of course, a very slight motion.

It will be very helpful to practise octaves in repeated groups of two, three, four, five and six, as in the chord exercises. This should be done very rhythmically. The impression of speed is greater and the playing pleasanter to listen to if the rhythm is strong and elastic.

One should concentrate on the wrist motion and try to make it faster than the tempo. In other words, let the speed of the wrist (with ease) dictate the tempo. Make no effort. If fast playing becomes muddy, or gets out of control, return to slow motion practice.

Arm weight is added when needed, just as in chord technique, but light octaves should be very free and easy before forte octaves are attempted.

It is a good idea to practise octave passages from compositions. Not only is it more fun but, as it makes more demands on the player, it will be a musical incentive to acquire a wide variety of tone and control of the lightest pianissimo to the biggest fortissimo.

Even if it seems a bother to work octaves in this way, it is well worth the effort, for it gives great endurance, and it develops a very loose wrist, which will improve the whole technique.

XIV

PEDAL

It may be objected that no one can learn the complications of good pedaling from a book, and while it is true that a fine pedal depends upon a well trained ear and a thorough knowledge of style and interpretation, even a student with little time or money for lessons can learn to use the pedal well simply by playing a piece many times without any pedal at all and then using it *only* where it is necessary for musical reasons.

To play without any pedal makes the ear much keener, and having to decide for himself how to use the pedal *only* where it will enhance the playing, is bound to develop the student's critical faculties. It is a simple way to study, but will produce surprisingly good results, especially if the player compares his own ideas to those of experienced artists, by using records if necessary. In this way, the ear becomes very discerning and will be a reliable guide to other aspects of playing as well.

XV

RHYTHM

Rhythm is too apt to be taken for granted. While everyone will agree that it is a most important element of music, one seldom hears playing where rhythm is such a fundamental part of the performance that the listener is completely carried by it without effort.

There is a vast difference between nice, even playing, and a really vital musical pulsation. The metronome is of little help in this connection. All it can do is to show whether or not the playing is even. Obviously, if it were truly rhythmic it could not be used for different kinds of time: 2-4, 3-4, etc. In fact, the students who depend upon the metronome develop a certain jigginess in their playing which can ruin the phrasing and become very boring.

To rely upon heavy accentuation has a similar effect. A great artist will play certain kinds of music where a long melodic line is essential, practically without accents, almost as if there were no bar lines, but there will be a deep underlying pulsation, otherwise the playing will become bogged down—static and tiring. There is nothing exaggerated about a good rhythm. It is so natural that the listener is likely to be impressed by the beauty of the phrasing, not realizing that an extraordinary feeling for rhythm has generated that phrasing.

The best way to work for this ideal is to count out loud vigorously, gently accenting every note so that even the least important one has its exact place in what should be an elastic motion rather than a mathematical division of time. The goal to aim for is a rhythmic flow which will control every note and every motion. This must be worked out in very slow practice, otherwise it is likely to disappear entirely in speed.

As a powerful swing is developed, it will allow a free expression of musical ideas (in fact, it might almost be said to initiate these ideas), while the hands will relax and follow automatically. Without a good rhythm, there will be effort, and effort always causes stiffness. With a strong rhythm in slow practice, every note falls into place, and as the tempo is increased, the rhythm kept elastic and flowing, everything will still be in place, speed will not seem hurried and no unevenness can develop. Then any necessary rubato will not hold up the natural "pace" of the composition but, correctly used, will seem an inevitable part of the interpretation.

If this idea of rhythm sounds elusive and visionary to the student, he should not dismiss it as unimportant, but work at it until it carries his whole playing. Once he has felt the exhilaration that this brings, he will never be satisfied with anything else.

XVI

MEMORY

Although the subject of memory might not seem to be within the scope of a work on piano technique, it is so bound up in the whole approach to playing that it ought to be considered here, despite the fact that in the last analysis memory is a byproduct of interpretation. The average student will probably have memorized a composition by the time he has worked out all the interpretive and technical problems, and the less memory is forced, the better.

First, it should be said that if a student has a naturally good memory which stands up under difficulties, it should never be interfered with. Anyone with a good memory probably works correctly from a natural instinct, and some of the methods of memorizing in vogue, because they interfere with this natural way of working, are positively harmful. Visual memorizing of the printed page is one. First, because it involves two distinct mental processes in recalling: a mental reading of the music, and then playing the cor-

responding notes on the keyboard. Second, if followed literally, it would be bound to distract the player's mind from the interpretation of *sound* on which it should concentrate and not on the printed page. Also in playing, the association should not be with the early stages of learning from the printed page, but with the sound of the music.

Obviously a visual image is not essential, or blind people could not play. While there is no doubt some visual image in normal people's musical memory, it should not be put first, as hearing and touch are the important elements and must have the artist's attention. There is no more sense in visualizing the printed page than there would be in visualizing a map when following a regularly traveled route. The map may be necessary for finding the route in the first place, but it is soon discarded and landmarks are remembered.

To rely on musical analysis in memorizing is open to the same objection, that it involves two mental processes, first thinking of a complicated form and then reconstructing that form. That is not to say that analysis is no help to the memory in the beginning of study, and is of course necessary for the full understanding of the score, but it should be so absorbed by the mind that the player is not consciously thinking of it, otherwise it may be an actual hindrance to memory and make for pedantic playing.

The practice of memorizing away from the piano may work well for people with a strong imagination, but since it lacks direct aural and tactile association. it is likely to be a waste of time, besides being very tedious.

If the process of memorizing is examined, it will be seen to work roughly as follows:

- 1) The eye reads the notes.
- 2) The fingers feel the corresponding keys.
- 3) The ear hears the sound of these notes when played. (This is an oversimplification for the sake of clarity. An experienced musician can "hear" the printed page from looking at it, etc.)

In *recalling* what has been memorized, the process is reversed:

- 1) The sound is imagined.
- 2) The fingers feel the associated keys, and,
- 3) if a visual image follows, it is likely to be of the keyboard and not of the printed page.

If, through some unnatural forcing, this order is upset, the memory will become confused.

In attempting to recall music naturally, the student should sing inwardly, making the hands follow the ear. If he finds this difficult, he should sing out loud. If that bothers him, he should count out loud from the beginning to the end of the piece, concentrating on the rhythm and keeping that going no matter what happens. Finally, he should be able to keep his ear on the interpretation, letting his hands follow.

He should, of course, be able to begin at any phrase instantly without hesitation. To be completely sure of this, it is a good idea to begin work at the last phrase, then the next to last, etc., until he is back at the beginning, letting each phrase overlap a little. Then if he begins at the beginning and plays a measure or two, then skips to the next phrase, etc., without hesitation until the end, he will feel sure of himself and the piece will remain fixed in his mind for a long time. This is, of course, not the main issue. The chief thing to bear in mind is that the ear must lead, but if the pupil has had memory difficulties it will give him confidence to feel that he can begin at any point.

The two greatest aids to memory are rhythmic practice and working without looking at the hands, because rhythm is a strong fundamental association in music, and feeling for the keys without looking develops the tactile association.

Obviously, both the aural and tactile impressions should be extremely clear, and since the mind seems to work subconsciously when the player is not occupied with music, he should finish each practice period with a clear and easy repetition (with the music if necessary) of the piece that he is working on. This is also true for any technical practice.

It goes without saying that in performance the player must concentrate on interpretation, and should have developed sufficient routine so that his fingers merely follow his thought. Unfortunately, most of us associate concentration with some sort of supreme mental effort, and that is bound to make for tension. However, keeping the mind on one thing simply means relaxing its hold on all other ideas, just as in a good technique all the muscles not actually in use are relaxed. This may be difficult at first, but it will help to think of "letting go" everything except the sound of the music. With a little practice, this will not only become easy, but will give the player a new grasp of the music.

XVII

SUMMARY

The first thing for the student to remember is that the ear must always lead, even in the simplest exercises. That is, the result must be imagined inwardly—tone quality, dynamics, rhythm, etc., before playing. This habit of "hearing in advance" will be the greatest aid to memory and to musical performance, as well as mere finger technique.

It might truly be said that all there is to playing the piano is to accommodate the hand (and the arm) to the action of the keys with due regard for musical aims. However, this will not be too much comfort to a student struggling with a technical difficulty. Nevertheless, it will be a help to keep certain facts always in mind: the key is both a lever and a springboard. Each finger springs from the bottom of the key (although the force is released before this) upward and slightly outward, the motion being very quick in a small space, namely, the one- to three-eighths of an inch that the key can move. The wrist gives with every

finger motion. The arm hangs lightly (except in forte playing) and loosely on the arch of the hand, which should be strong and flexible.

Since at all times the arm is ready to give leverage to the key, that is, to back it up with weight, there is a temptation to use weight unnecessarily. This must be avoided, or it will interfere with brilliance and speed and will also make the playing thick. Besides, unnecessary weight will stiffen the wrist, or at least take away from the complete detachment of hand and arm muscles. This is the reason why most practising should be pianissimo, firm but light.

One should return again and again to the slow motion work. That is like using a magnifying glass on one's playing. It will show up the slightest imperfection in control, and is the best way to correct it. In addition, it is the surest method of loosening the wrist. Once this feeling of a completely relaxed wrist is experienced in slow work, it can be imitated in fast or forte playing.

One should especially remember to work for extreme ease rather than speed, and that rhythm should dominate all practice. Even in the most prosaic exercises, the student should aim for a beautiful and varied tone. The importance of feeling the key under the finger before playing it cannot be overemphasized, even if it holds up the playing at first. This habit can easily be acquired by practicing without looking at the hands. One need only to try this to see that it makes for relaxation and will eliminate most difficulties.

Finally, there comes a time after basic principles have been so thoroughly absorbed that they have become second nature, when the student must make a bold attempt to play like an artist. He will find this effort to reach his musical ideal inspiring, and at the same time he can see what is lacking in his equipment and can take the necessary steps to correct any defects.

short lesson attack, and cong throughout the text, to factor of the wrist's position, the town junction of flexibility between the forgers and the forearm. Exercises are recommended which will facilitate the student's grasp of this essential principle.

For anyone seeking mastery of the keyboard, A NEW APPROACH TO PIANO TECHNIQUE is an absolute mecessity.



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